



# Leading From the Heart

Recognized as one of the leading educators in the country and a best-selling author (most recently of *Let Your Life Speak* and *The Courage to Teach*), **Parker Palmer** has a message that reaches audiences as diverse as the CEOs of universities and foundations and the readers of *O* magazine. In conversation with L.J. Rittenhouse, president of andBEYOND Communications, he talks about **authenticity and leadership**.

**R**ittenhouse: You talk about inner qualities such as integrity, wholeness, and leading from the heart. Are these qualities looked for in business leaders?

Palmer: My guess would have to be no. In almost all of our major institutions, including the world of higher education, with which I'm most intimately acquainted, we are mainly concerned about how well people can perform in the external world. We want people who know how to make the right moves, and look good making those moves. We rarely ask where those moves are coming from or what motivates them.

What I'm talking about is the importance of leading from a place of authenticity in oneself. It takes courage to do that, because you're putting your own identity and integrity into the public arena. You're standing up for things you believe in. You are professing values that are important to you. And whenever you do that, you're going to draw slings and arrows.

In my doctoral training, for example, my values, my convictions, my beliefs, or my personal integrity weren't important to my success. What was more important was learning to make the external moves that would qualify me as a member of that profession. My guess is that there's still not much attention being paid to this inner knowledge and authenticity.

As the great jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker said, "If it ain't in your heart, it ain't in your horn." We can hear the horns everywhere, but if they're not being played

from the heart, then certain negative consequences follow. Rittenhouse: What are these negative consequences?

Palmer: I know from my experience inside corporations and large-scale organizations that everybody is busy sizing up the leader and asking, "Is this a divided person or a person of integrity? Is what we see what we get? Is he or she the same on the inside as on the outside?"

Students ask this about teachers in the classroom. Employees ask it about their bosses. Citizens ask it about their politicians. When the answer is, "No, what we're seeing on the outside is not the same as who they are on the inside," then everything starts to fall apart.

That's because I have just described an unsafe situation: When leaders with the power to call the tune and shape the dance are perceived as lacking congruence or integrity, they create unsafe situations. And what do people do in unsafe situations? They start hiding out. They start faking it. They start giving less than what they have to give. They start playing it close to the vest. They start shielding themselves. An organization simply cannot function at anywhere near full effectiveness when that kind of thing is going on — and there is a lot of that going on.

Rittenhouse: Can you imagine that leaders who create safe situations by taking the inner life seriously will be recruited in the future?

Palmer: The seeds of taking inner reality seriously have

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always been there. If you look at history, the assumption that only the external world is real has been a relatively short blip on the screen. The idea that the inner world is an illusion only began in the 18th century with the rise of scientism. That's a pretty short period of time. In fact, the seeds of understanding the power of inner reality have been dormant, not destroyed. From the beginning of human history, people have understood the power of the inner life, and crafted various ways of bringing it to the external world. I think that we're in a recovery process now, where we're taking the plastic wrap off the earth and letting those seeds germinate.

*Rittenhouse:* Wait a minute. What is "scientism"?

*Palmer:* The distinction I'm making is that science is not the enemy here. Great scientists have always had a very deep sense of inner reality, of the power of intuition, of working from the heart. Scientism means taking this very narrow box called the empirical method, proving things through logic and data, and saying that's all there can possibly be to reality.

Ever since the rise of scientism, Western culture has attached reality and power only to the external world, because that's the world that can be measured with data and parsed with logic. This scientism has not given any reality or power to the inner world, even though great scientists themselves always have done so. Great scientists are always close to being mystics. They wouldn't be able to penetrate the opaqueness of nature if they weren't.

*Rittenhouse:* You've just completed a workshop for the CEOs of foundations and universities that you call "The Courage to Lead." Why does leadership take courage?

*Palmer:* "Courage" is a word that relates to the heart. In

French, the root of the word is the root for "heart." What we're reaching for in these workshops is the importance of leading from the heart. In ancient times, the word heart didn't simply mean the emotions, as it tends to mean today. It meant the center in the human self, where everything comes together — where will and intellect and feeling and intuition and the capacity to hold a vision all converge. It's about the integrity of the human self.

The work we're doing with these groups is first of all to help people draw closer to that place within themselves. We then try to help them understand the consequences of leading from integrity, to understand that not doing this is even more painful than suffering the slings and arrows of doing it!

The outcome of not leading from integrity is to lead a divided life — to behave one way on the outside while believing or affirming something completely different on the inside. In human terms, that is a recipe for disaster. It means being separated from oneself, which is the most painful way a human being can live.

*Rittenhouse:* At the same time, do you also create unsafe environments where people go underground?

*Palmer:* Exactly. The fact is that all human organizations need clarity from their leaders about the core values they hold simply because it makes the situation safe. People then know what they're dealing with. They don't have to drain energy away from their work to try to figure that out. I would much rather know, with clarity, what the leader believes or doesn't believe so that I can move

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ahead to either commit to those values or to hide out or even to leave the organization.

*Rittenhouse:* But in this age of political correctness, aren't we supposed to submerge what we believe or pretend that values don't matter?

*Palmer:* One of the great illusions in Western culture is that we can somehow be trained to leave our values behind when we do our work. That's a great illusion in the training of faculty, for example. I do workshops in which professors tell me, "I can't possibly take my values into the classroom!" I reply, "So, who else are you going to send in there, then? If you're there, your values are there. If you don't think that your students are actively engaged in figuring out what your values are and discovering who the real person is behind the teacher's mask, you haven't been paying attention."

Are you a Democrat or a Republican? Are you for abortion or against it? Students are very clever about figuring out who you really are. Then they dance accordingly. Things get a lot healthier when you can be up front about your values in a classroom. There's no way to hide them, in any event.

*Rittenhouse:* How do organizations benefit by actually trying to live the values they hold?

*Palmer:* Every value system is somehow about relationships. A value tells us how we ought to best relate to something, whether it's a person, a product, a process, or just telling the truth. Organizations aren't held together simply by values, but by how these values are embedded in relationships. Meaningful relationships, those that aren't veiled or masked or fundamentally fraudulent, can be very tenacious, even when separated by space and time. We have a human capacity to connect in ways other than face-to-face, mediated by shared values, which is quite remarkable.

I like to remind people that a liberally educated person is one who knows how to connect with a whole lot of dead people who wrote great books and thought great thoughts. One of the gifts of a good education is this capacity to have an ongoing conversation with people who aren't even there. We carry those conversations inside of us.

We can think about corporations with sites dotted around the globe as being held together by an invisible network or a community of values that is invisible but nonetheless very powerful. People want this; they need it.

*Rittenhouse:* If a CEO came to you and said, "I need you to find some good candidates," how would you reply?

*Palmer:* I'd say, "I need a profile of what your personal values are, and I need to square that with what I can learn about the practices within your corporate culture." I'm not just going to say, "Thank you very much for your list of 18 core values. Now I can go look for people who fit that profile." I really need to know whether this is an integral organization in the sense that those values are reflected in the firm's practices.

When we use the word "values," we have to use it with seriousness. A value is something I stand by, it's not just something I say I believe, but also something I enact in real space and time. In all kinds of organizations, from churches to businesses, a certain set of values may be professed about human relationships, and yet when it comes to making decisions, something quite different happens. This gap between the professed value and the lived value becomes depressing and detrimental.

*Rittenhouse:* Doesn't the ability to live one's values require the humor to appreciate paradox and an ability to live with tension?

*Palmer:* Absolutely. E.F. Schumacher said, "Good mothers and good teachers work every day with children who have to be held in a paradoxical relationship between discipline and freedom. No good mother or no good teacher can write you a formula about how to hold a child in that paradox. They just do it. A child grows up healthy and whole when that paradox between discipline and freedom is held together in the person of the mother and teacher."

I think that's a brilliant insight, because we can all identify with it. Do children need discipline to grow? Yes, absolutely. Do children need freedom to grow? Yes, absolutely. You cannot choose one or the other. You have to provide both. And somehow we know how to do it.

## CoreValues

But I can tell you why we don't like paradox in our culture. It's because many of us have a very short fuse for holding tension. We hate tensions of any sort. We want to get it over with. We want to resolve tension instantly. This is why we have meetings in which first somebody proposes one side of the question, and then somebody proposes the other side. After the tension has mounted for a little while, maybe 10 or 15 minutes, a third person calls for a vote to get the tension over with. Then we vote, and 51% of the people win by telling the other 49% where to get off, and the 49% proceed to spend the next decade undermining the decision we thought we had made, and all because we don't know how to hold the tension.

*Rittenhouse:* So is holding the tension another one of the leadership practices you would look for in candidates?

*Palmer:* Yes, the capacity to work creatively with paradoxical tensions. Another great example of paradox is that we usually learn the most from our failures. But we're not taught that in school. In school, we're taught that we only learn when we get an A.

*Rittenhouse:* If you were an executive recruiter, what would you find most exciting and challenging about your work?

*Palmer:* One of the most exciting tasks would be to find questions I could ask to get inside the lives of my candidates. For example, I might ask them to tell me about a contradiction in their life that they have viewed as fruitful rather than destructive over a period of time. I would ask them to tell me about something that is tugging them this way and that way, and how this has somehow opened them to greater possibilities in life, rather than be a destructive tension.

I'd love to find people who've turned the corner from thinking of tension as always being something that creates stress and negative consequences to something that opens them into largeness. I would also ask this type of question: "When things get confusing, what do you do to get clarity?" I'd want to find out what these folks do to get discernment.

I would also find it fascinating to craft questions

about the corporate culture to help me find out what they're really looking for, rather than simply accept what their handout says. I think that the opportunity to look beneath the surface of things, whether it's a corporation or an individual, is very exciting work.

*Rittenhouse:* The ability to make decisions on the basis of incomplete information is a key leadership ability that seems to be getting more difficult with information overload. What's the impact of this overload on decision-making? And what is the role of values in sorting it out?

*Palmer:* There are two consequences that I'm aware of from this oversaturation of information. One is confusion. The Web allows us to learn about anything in the twinkling of an eye. I spend time on the Web tracking down facts just because I enjoy knowing things. The problem is that we begin to know so much that we lose sight of what is important and what isn't.

The second consequence is what my friend's daughter meant when she said, "I'm whelmed over!" When the world is presented in such detail on such a massive scale, we begin to feel powerless about ourselves. And people don't like to feel powerless and confused.

Part of the current turning to the inner life is a search for a set of principles or lenses through which to look at things. It's a way of discerning what counts and what doesn't. And this discernment allows me to recalibrate my own weight and responsibility in relation to some of those things, so I can reclaim my own power.

In my book on vocation, *Let Your Life Speak*, I quote a wonderful writer, Frederick Buechner, who says, "Vocation is that place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need." By turning to the inner life, I can find out what makes me genuinely glad — not giddy, but genuinely fulfilled that my gifts are being used in some meaningful way. The inner life also provides clarity about the intersection between me and the world. Once you find that intersection, you no longer feel confused or powerless. I think information overload drives us toward those principles of discernment that are found in the inner life.

*Rittenhouse:* Does the path to the inner life require being open to what seems confusing?



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*Palmer:* For me, one inner-life discipline is that of being open to many voices and many perspectives. Not just to lots of information, but to different people who see the world in qualitatively different ways, whether they be poets or novelists or young people or elders or scientists or sages. It's important to be sure that I am making myself vulnerable to a range of voices.

When I'm sitting with someone whose worldview doesn't sound familiar to me and is threatening because I don't get it, there's a lot of inner work to be done in that moment to simply calm myself and say, "Stay open, listen, don't rush to judgment, and ask good questions. It will evoke this person further. Try to understand." If you do that, the windows of perception will open wider.

Sometimes we think of spiritual disciplines as doing things like sitting cross-legged and chanting a mantra. Those techniques don't interest me nearly as much as the spiritual discipline of sitting with someone who feels to you like they're talking from another planet, and doing this inner work of telling yourself, "Stay open, get in an inquiry mode, and try to learn. There's something here that will expand my sense of reality if I'm willing to let it." That's spiritual discipline, and it's real inner work. It has nothing to do with floating off into some other dimension. It has a lot to do with getting your feet more firmly on the ground in the real world.

*Rittenhouse:* Along those lines, Parker, how has the

reception been to *Let Your Life Speak*, your recent book describing your journey to explore vocation and avocation?

*Palmer:* I'm always hesitant to comment on how my own books are being received. One of the things I've learned on the inner journey is that seeing oneself is probably the hardest thing of all to do. But I can tell you this. I'm getting a flood of letters, e-mails, and phone calls. I got letters just this morning from an economist working in Nicaragua who is searching for a new vocational direction and from a priest who was reading the book on a mountaintop in Nepal!

But I am especially touched by the number of responses I've gotten from younger people. One of the tasks I set for myself in that book was to tell some of the truth about the life journey and the vocational journey in a way that young people don't often hear from their elders. I particularly wanted to talk about the great difficulties of these journeys.

I don't want to be one of those elders who stands up and exhorts young folks to work harder so that they may achieve everything I've achieved.

That's not only fraudulent, but it's a great insult to them. I'd rather say, "Look, I'm a little farther down the road than you are. I know some things that come from that simple fact. You also know some things about the emerging culture that I need to know, so I'm writing and speaking simply to companion you on this journey. I want to hear your news, as well as tell you mine." ■